

Speaking Their Language: How to Communicate Better with Policymakers and Opinion Shapers – and Why Academics Should Bother in the First Place

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Abstract. Scholars of international environmental politics who want their work to affect policy must learn to speak and write in a slightly different language – with extreme concision, an appealing format, and ready solutions to pressing policy questions. While communicating directly with policymakers and journalists can be time-consuming and exasperating, the direct approach may be the only way to rise above the din of the increasingly noisy marketplace of ideas.

Key words: communication, opinion, op-ed, policy, policymakers, media

Abbreviations: op-ed – opposite-editorial; NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

The phrase “policy-friendly publication” never fails to elicit both a smile and an admonition from a colleague of mine at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. This colleague – a former senior official with the U.S. Department of Commerce – remembers an era when mail was delivered twice daily to government offices. “I’d get a stack of publications this high delivered to me first thing in the morning”, he says, holding his hands about a foot apart. “And then I’d get another stack in the afternoon”. To this policymaker, “policy-friendly” did not simply mean a publication on a policy issue. It means a publication that catches his eye and can be digested in three minutes – on those days when he has three minutes to spare.

Now, following the 2001 anthrax attacks on Congress, mail sent to the U.S. government is first routed to an irradiation facility in Ohio. It comes back from this Midwest detour tan, brittle, smelly, and most importantly, delayed. The timely delivery of a message to Washington policymakers through the mail is part of a bygone era.

But the information glut that my colleague remembers is also flooding nearly everyone with influence on public policy: officials in international organizations, NGO activists, journalists, and those of us in the research community. The

competition for eyes and ears is stiffer than ever. And many academics who are reluctant to stray beyond the narrow bands of their disciplinary journals (or who are afraid their research will be bastardized and mischaracterized by the mass media) take that competition as confirmation that they should let policymakers and journalists find them – not the other way around.

In many cases and for many issues of moment, however, such withdrawal is a critical mistake. Communicating directly with policymakers and journalists is not for all academics or researchers. It is genuinely exasperating to be misquoted or read nuanced and well-sourced scholarship that has been oversimplified and abused. But scholars of international environmental politics who want their work to play roles in policymaking – in the long term as well as the short term – must go further than simply publishing books with academic presses or articles in refereed journals. They must learn to speak and write in a slightly different language – not in the clichés of sound bites, but with extreme concision, an appealing format, and ready solutions to pressing policy questions.

My experience at the Woodrow Wilson Center, a non partisan, non-advocacy institution that fosters research of interest to Washington and international policymakers, has taught me that reaching policymakers and the press means speaking their language.¹ Doing so requires taking into account not only their vocabulary and their attention spans, but also pinpointing where they direct that attention. We in the research community cannot answer the question “Is anyone listening?” until we make sure they can understand us in the first place.

The lessons I’ve learned over ten years of hosting meetings on international environmental politics in Washington are just that – lessons for Washington. By no means are these suggestions suitable for all arenas. Academics need longer scholarly formats like peer-reviewed journals to debate research within disciplines (and get tenure). And what works in Washington may not in the rest of the world’s capitals. Anecdotal reports from international colleagues suggest that different rules often apply to policymaking overseas (Bruyninckx 2005; Carius 2005). We should tailor our writing and our presentations to our audience, which hopefully will include the people making our policy decisions.

An academic is lucky to get fifteen minutes of fame; in my case, it was only four. Four minutes to make my case to “the most sophisticated foreign policy audience you will ever address”, as my boss Lee Hamilton, a former U.S. Congressman from Indiana, dubbed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Three Wilson Center colleagues and I made one-on-one presentations during Annan’s visit to the Wilson Center in December 2002. Since it usually takes me four minutes just to warm up, I had more than a little trepidation about presenting a complex topic like trans-boundary water conflict and cooperation in such a short period of time. I rewrote and reworked my presentation over and over until it was exactly four minutes – no more and no less. I do not harbor any fantasies that the Secretary-General adopted all my suggestions after this brief encounter, but I found weighing every word a

remarkably empowering and encouraging process. We should feel challenged, not insulted, when we are allotted only a few minutes at the microphone.

Competing Ideas

Policymakers and journalists shop in a marketplace of ideas. Many of these ideas are bad ones, backed by skewed evidence or perhaps no evidence at all. But we are not likely to supplant those bad ideas unless we bring our research to the same marketplace in a problem-solving, policy-friendly package.

Scholars must be ready when current events provide a window of opportunity to meet a time-sensitive policy need with the results of their research. This match-making requires having a well-prepared answer when the journalist or policymaker calls. More likely (because they don't often phone), scholars must take their ideas directly to the policymaker, via a newspaper opposite-editorial (op-ed) or policy briefing that offers suggestions at an opportune moment.

For example, another Wilson Center colleague spun off a Sunday *Washington Post* op-ed from his book on so-called "rogue states" (Litwak 2000a, b). He argued persuasively that lumping North Korea, Iran, and Iraq under the same banner undercut effective policy responses. His analysis, coming as nuclear proliferation concerns put these states on the Clinton administration's front burner, helped fuel the policy debate that ultimately led to the administration abandoning the term.

Agenda setting is a longer-term strategy. Bringing attention to a neglected issue is an incremental process that requires convincing policymakers a nasty surprise awaits them if they do not take action now. The positive approach – highlighting opportunities that are about to slip away – can also work. However, some sort of crisis usually brings a long-term issue to the forefront; in this situation, scholars can combine strategies by helping policymakers respond to the immediate problem while locking in greater attention to the long-term issue. A rash of forest fires could lead to column inches on long-term forestry policy. Floods, droughts, and high temperatures remind journalists that they should check in on the state of climate science. And spiking energy prices provide a platform for critiques of consumption and inefficiency.

Form as well as Substance

Policymakers and journalists want presentations that focus on a single problem and are expressed in short, crisp sentences and paragraphs absolutely free of jargon: no "discourses", no "epistemic communities". And descriptions of our research – or of the problems or conditions it explores – are not enough: we must focus on solutions. In essence, we are providing a deliverable: we are not only trying to help meliorate the world, we are helping policymakers clear their inboxes. Our ideas need to be timely and help solve a problem they are facing *that day*.

Consider this situation we faced at the Wilson Center a few years back: the Chinese premier Zhu Rongji was coming to town and the administration asked us to identify some “low-hanging fruit” to constitute a set of environmental cooperation agreements. We quickly assembled a group of experts to offer ideas to policymakers at the Old Executive Office Building and sent additional policy alternatives in a short follow-up memo. A number of the ideas discussed that day were added to the negotiation package and eventually to the bilateral memoranda of understanding. We should dream of getting calls like this one, and we must be prepared to take advantage of such opportunities.

The format and placement of your message – through op-eds, policy journals, fact sheets, press releases, policy briefs, and collaborations with Washington-based institutions – are also part of speaking the policymakers’ language. Writing in short and, by definition, superficial formats (op-eds are rarely more than 800 words) is often viewed by academics as impossible, or at least disingenuous in its lack of nuance.

But my argument is not to stop writing research articles and become a newspaper columnist. Well-researched and analytically rigorous work – published in refereed articles and books – must stand behind these short-form products. However, consulting with the potential consumers of your research early and often may improve its quality – offering the opportunity to “ground-test” theories, revealing new data, and placing specific research questions in larger policy contexts. Such consultations, partly by establishing relationships of trust among competing information sources, will also increase the likelihood that your analysis will be taken seriously. Once you have hooked the policymaker with your ideas, they’ll delve deeper into the substance of your research by reading the article or the book, if only on the Metro ride home. For example, short website blurbs, occasional lectures, and derivative articles on the thesis Ken Conca and I advanced in our 2002 book *Environmental Peacemaking* continue to produce requests from press and policymakers for the entire book (Conca and Dabelko 2002; Conca et al. 2005).

There is no magic length or format, according to Alexander Carius, co-director of Adelphi Research in Berlin, who tries regularly to bridge the research and policy divide in Europe (Carius 2005). It is a process that requires consulting regularly with policymakers to learn what he or she prefers. In this relationship – often personal – proximity is important.

Informal, off-the-record brainstorming sessions are one way to build these relationships and insert ideas into the policy realm. In Washington and European capitals, NGOs or applied research centers are often asked to sponsor not-for-attribution workshops to float new ideas on a particular international environmental issue. Both researchers and scholars can throw out ideas without being held to the rigors of refereed journals or official government positions. If an idea resonates with a given policymaker, he or she is free to use it, often with the tacit agreement that he or she can claim credit for it, thus reaffirming the oft-repeated maxim that you can accomplish a tremendous amount in Washington if you let others take credit for

your ideas. And if the brainstorming meeting does not produce a usable idea, neither the academic nor the policymaker has lost any reputation or prestige.

Bring the Mountain to Mohammad

Academics commonly neglect the power of coming to Washington either to present research findings or to collaborate with local institutions. Others come but do not bother to engage the policy community. When asked whether she was meeting with policymakers during her stay in D.C., one scholar visiting a colleague of mine replied condescendingly, “No, they wouldn’t understand my model anyway”.

But Washington is home to many organizations that can serve as conduits for ideas, depending on whom one is trying to reach. Some academics seek non-residential appointments and speaking engagements at some of the one-stop-shopping locales such as The Brookings Institution, American Enterprise Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, or Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Many of these cross partisan lines, not leaning strongly to one side like the conservative Heritage Foundation or the libertarian Cato Institute.

In international environmental politics, organizations like the Worldwatch Institute, the World Resources Institute, National Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation, World Wildlife Fund, Environmental Defense, and Resources for the Future provide forums for inserting policy-friendly ideas into policy debates. And finally, many of the Washington-based universities expect their faculty or research associates to engage in efforts to push ideas into the policy realm.

A few institutions, such as the Wilson Center, adopt nonpartisan and non-advocacy stances (by law in our case). In our experience, this stance means that participants in our meetings (unlike some others) do not know what questions they’ll be asked before they walk into the room. The Wilson Center hosts approximately 600 public or by-invite meetings every year, chaired and paneled by experts addressing topics ranging from environmental terrorism to the future of super-computing. These meetings are attended by a broad cross-section of bureaucrats, journalists, scholars, and NGO officials, and provide a perfect opportunity for academics to integrate the fruits of their research into policy discussions and to initiate relationships with policymakers. In this way, we bring the mountain to Mohammed.

Presenting research findings in a short meeting is like writing a memo; successful presentations are often very short by academic standards (10–20 minutes), lack the exclusive language intelligible only to those with political science or biology PhD’s, couch the presentation in the context of a current policy debate or decision, and offer analysis of concrete steps that have been or could be taken to address a specific problem. Powerpoint slides can be effective, as the graphical presentation of data leads to its share of “eureka” moments. But powerpoint presentations can be deadly if they are merely an unending stream of text or drag on too long before reaching

their conclusions. Unlike our students, who must sit through the hour-long lectures, the policy people don't – and won't – and will simply get up and leave you alone with your slideshow.

I recently attended an international environment conference in Europe during which attendees were held hostage by a dry and interminable powerpoint presentation, chockablock with needlessly complicated shapes more appropriate at the base of Stonehenge than at a conference. In the middle of the academic presentation, a former European legislator leaned over to me and said, "Looking at graphs like this makes you want to go out and slaughter a goat". Translation: We should avoid sacrificing our own ideas before they even get into the policy arena. But we first need to recognize that we *can* insert our ideas into that arena – effectively.

Notes

1. The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars was founded in 1968 by an act of Congress as the formal memorial to the United States' 28th president, Woodrow Wilson. For more information on the Wilson Center, see <http://www.wilsoncenter.org>. For more information on the Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Project, see <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/ecsp>.

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